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AUTHOR Neuleib, Janice G.
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ABSTRACT

The steps followed in setting up a college writing center are outlined in this paper, and comments from two graduate students who worked as full time tutors in the center are presented. The first section of the paper describes the way faculty members determined the type of center needed at their university, how they first envisioned the center, how they obtained funding for it, and how they communicate about the center to other faculty members and to students. The second section contains the graduate students' reports, which deal with such topics as early difficulties faced by the center; the tutor's role in diagnosing students' writing problems, planning individual courses of study, and instructing students; frustrations faced by the center staff; ways in which the center can help students; and specific problems of individual students who have been helped at the center, including the problem of fear of writing. (GW)

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Janice G. Neuleib
Illinois State University

THE WRITING CENTER: HOW TO

Only a year ago the Writing Center at our University consisted of two graduate students cramped into a small office. We knew that we needed a change. Other schools were setting up learning labs of various sorts. Our problem was to move from a position of weakness to one of strength as quickly and efficiently as possible. How does one go about setting up a writing center? Where does one go for ideas? What about funding? Where can the staff come from? How can the University expand in this area without taking away from other programs? All these questions flooded in on our Freshman Writing Committee. We had to find a way to organize our efforts and to do what needed to be done without disrupting current programs in the Department of English. Our department began a breathless round of activities designed so that we could have an operating writing center when the University opened in the fall of 1976. We do have our Writing Center, staffed by faculty and students. The steps we followed to set it up may help others to develop facilities designed for their own needs.

1. Type of Center needed

At the four C's conference in April, we talked with many persons who had established or worked in writing centers and laboratories and with other persons who had not been successful in establishing these facilities. The first rule seemed to be that the department, college, and University must be willing

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to support expended writing facilities. The support need not, in fact must not, be all monetary. Our first source of support was a large part moral. It came from the Kellogg Foundation Teaching/Learning Center here on campus. The Center director asked us how we intended to go about developing an expanded writing facility. We described the sort of place we had in mind. Evidently, our description was too unclear because he smiled and said that we needed to visit other writing centers to see what ours should be. He offered us transportation funds to visit several places within a three hundred mile radius. Of course, our time and energy would not permit as many visits as we would have preferred. We did manage to go to the University of Iowa, the University of Illinois, and to Illinois Central College. Soon we began to have a clear idea about the type of Writing Center that would be perfect for our University. It would not be just like any that we had seen, but it would be a combination of all the ideas that were most appropriate to our needs.

2. The early vision

We soon decided that we wanted a place that would serve the entire University community as well as the writing program in the Department of English and the Freshman Rhetoric program. When the center would be fully functioning, it would include a teaching materials collection for composition and creative writing, an ESL library, technical writing materials, and selected materials appropriate for tutoring students in each department throughout

the campus. This early vision was important because it directed our proposal writing and it kept our first efforts from narrowing in scope. Of course, we did not have all the materials nor the tutors to use them at the beginning. We are still acquiring materials and training tutors, but we are going in the direction we had planned. We also wanted our center to be a service to the larger community. The Continuing Education program here on campus is supporting our efforts so that we may work with high school students and teachers, showing them what will be happening in college writing in the next few years. In this way, the Writing Center can become a part of the larger writing context surrounding the University.

3. Funding

Our English Department is feeling the budget crunch as all others are. Despite this ubiquitous problem, our department chairperson wanted very much to see the Writing Center become a reality. We began to investigate the funding possibilities and found that funding outside the University would be a possibility but that it would take time to acquire, so we looked inside. This point is the one at which the support of the school as a whole is very important. The deans could see that there was a desperate need throughout the University and were behind the idea of the Writing Center, especially as it would be designed to meet the needs of all the colleges.

On our campus we have an Instructional Development Program which funds improvement in student instruction. We wrote a grant proposal showing that the Writing Center was one of the most important areas of need on our campus and were partially funded for our Center. All materials and travel funds, as well as student work-study time, are paid through this funding center. The Department of English provides teaching staff or faculty to staff the Center. Two members have part-time released time and two graduate students work full time. Several undergraduate teaching assistants also tutor. The number of teaching assistants will vary because these students are in a special undergraduate experience course through which they may choose to work either with faculty members in the composition classroom or to tutor in the Writing Center. Usually three or four of these students work as regular tutors five hours per week. We also plan to establish a practicum course which will be directed especially at students who wish to tutor in the Writing Center for credit alone. The undergraduate teaching assistants are paid for their work as well as given credit, but the number of these positions is limited by budgetary demands. Any tutoring or workshops offered off campus are staffed by our regular tutors, but the tutors are then reimbursed by the continuing education program.

5. Advertising and communication

People on campus have to know that the Writing Center is there. We offer a workshop to all interested faculty and administrators during which we

talk about what we can do and what we would like to do for them. Many of our faculty still suspect the English Department of having sensitivity sessions or political discussions in composition classes, so for us it takes a lot of reeducation of our own faculty to convince them that we really do want to teach writing. We also send referral sheets to all departments asking that faculty send us students with writing problems. If a faculty member refers a student, he or she then receives a report on that student's progress and attendance in the Center.

The profile which we try to present to students is a little different from that which we try to present to faculty. We want both to know that we intend to teach writing, but we also want the students to know that the process can be both work and fun. Students can walk into the Center without any referral at all with a problem so small as tomorrow's paper for an introductory speech class or one so large as a master's thesis that does not read smoothly. If a student has an area that has been missed or a special problem, he or she may sign up for regular tutoring. If students are not referred, they find out about these services by ads in the student newspaper, posters, and dorm announcements.

6. Tutors

Our most important assets are our tutors. The following pages include comments by two graduate students who have been working full time

this year in the Writing Center. They have learned and grown with us and have, in fact, been largely responsible for much of the Center's success.

(a) Joan Alexander

The role of the tutor is the heart of Writing Center activity. Not only is a tutor called on to aid a student who wants his finished paper to be a polished one, but more importantly, a person who tutors must also expect to be a diagnostician, prescriber, instructor, and counselor. In these varied roles the tutor encounters frustrations and compensations which provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning processes of language and communication.

One of the obstacles to success in our roles has been the tendency of some in the University community to regard the Writing Center as a proof-reading pool, a place where students (supposedly) can get "professionals" to revise, or even write, papers for them. Our purpose, however, is to teach students who come to us to be independent and successful as writers. With that goal in mind, we hung our sign and opened our door, a new staff ready to serve the student body.

Because we were a new university service, early in September our Center had no clientele, no firmly established areas of service, no reputation. Professors in the composition courses and various other friends of written expression announced our existence, but in our first week we suffered from neglect; no one needed a writing tutor's help. When the first writing assignments were returned to students, however, we found ourselves in business,

challenged to fill all of our roles simultaneously. Many students came in on their own. Others were specifically referred to us by their professors. They brought varied problems with their papers.

Since it is impossible to help a writer until we know his problems and needs, a tutor's first role is that of a diagnostician. What are this student's overall problems? What writing experience and instruction has he had? How aware is he of his weak areas? What has motivated him to come to the Writing Center? We try to answer these questions by examining the professor's referral form or the student's walk-in fact sheet, by examining samples of his writing, and by briefly interviewing him to seek insights into his needs and to build rapport. We use each of these devices to give us an overall picture of needs so that we can diagnose the problems. Diction? Agreement? Sentence structure? Thesis and topic sentences? Content? Attitude?

As we consider those questions in the early tutoring sessions, we gradually move from diagnosing needs to prescribing a program to help a student improve his writing skills. Which problems need immediate attention? Which will require long-term instruction and practice? Which problems are the student able to work with now? Has the referring professor suggested specific goals to work toward? Answers to these questions help us to prescribe a program directed toward each student's specific, immediate, and long-term needs.

When we diagnose problems and plan a course of study with a student, we try to identify likely causes of his difficulties. Perhaps his sentences are full of agreement problems, or maybe they ramble; he has never learned to see word, phrase, and clause relationships. If he is a non-native speaker of English or a student who comes from a strong dialectical environment, he may have trouble with standard idioms or may have difficulty hearing the sounds of word endings and distinctions between similar words. Sometimes terminology is his problem; a student cannot compose a theme because he does not know how to recognize or talk about such concepts as dramatic conflict, style, or mood which he encounters in his literature course. Maybe his problem is a matter of theme writing; he does not understand how to focus his thoughts on a specific thesis or collect specific details which could develop that thesis in a unified, coherent manner. We try to help the student identify some of his immediate needs by evaluating his work with him. "Yes, maybe we ought to begin with sentence structure. Why don't we start by . . . ? Let's plan to meet every . . . and work with this (or that) book."

With some of the needs defined and a plan developed, we move on to the role of instructor. Generally, we begin tutoring by working rather closely with a student, pointing out and clarifying definitions, discussing the meanings of examples, guiding him through applications to his own writing, and most of all, lending our support and encouragement. As a student learns to recognize

the difference between a good sentence and a poor one, or between a unified, well-developed paragraph and one that rambles, we encourage him to do more of his writing independently. After he plans and writes, together we evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of his product. Often this process generates new goals to add to the original prescription of study.

When progress is rapid and obvious, a student is often motivated to continue working on his writing skills. But if results come slowly, the frustration is as real for the tutor as for the student. As tutors, we find ourselves reconsidering our goals and methods of instruction. Possibly, we should be attacking a different writing problem first. Perhaps the material we are using is not the best resource for the student struggling with this particular concept. It may be that he had reached a plateau in his learning and needs to reinforce the skills he has mastered before we go farther. Such considerations keep a tutor aware of the complexities of language and the writing process, and call upon him to act as a counselor. At this point, rapport which has developed from genuine interest in the student and his needs as a writer becomes the essential quality in a tutorial relationship. We may be correct in our assessment of a student's needs and in a plan of study for him, but if that student does not have confidence in his tutor as a knowledgeable writer, in the tutor's interest in his writing needs, and in that tutor's sincere desire to be helpful, he will not benefit from the Writing Center. As tutors, our attitudes toward people and toward

the writing process directly affect our success from the beginning of a tutor-student relationship.

Humor, judiciously applied, for example, may break down barriers of hostility which some students bring with them. Some people enter the Writing Center loudly proclaiming, "I hate, despise, and *$&!!! English! Ain't nobody gonna teach me nuthin here!" We tutors stood aghast and apologetic the first time we had such a student. What possible answer could a harmless tutor offer to such determined resistance? But the next time we heard those loud protests, a quick-thinking tutor realized the absurdity of a student's protests in English that he hated English. The tutor pointed out to the person that if he were sincere, he would never utter another English word. The student had to admit, then, that he couldn't very well do without English, and with that admission, it was only a short step to the admission of his frustrations as a writer who needed help. With a joke, we were able to turn his attention to his real problem (uncertainty), and proceed to the business of teaching him to express his ideas as convincingly on paper as he could in speech. We cannot use this particular gambit with every reluctant student, of course, but if we can find something to laugh about, or at least smile about with a newcomer, that student is likely to feel that the Writing Center is a comfortable place where he can learn about writing in a pleasant, uncritical atmosphere.

Timid, shy, and fearful writers also need to feel comfortable in the Writing Center. One way to help them develop a more positive attitude is for

tutors to mention their own writing experiences and frustrations. Many beginning writers wrongly assume that good writers produce perfect papers the first time every time they write. I've begun to keep a portfolio of my own writing handy, a collection which contains everything from brainstorming sessions and ideas scribbled on gum-wrappers to rough drafts and the final paper graded and returned by the prof. My own examples demonstrate for a student that much of the writing process is actually pre-writing or re-writing, and they show how much of the process is actually a matter of thinking, organizing, and editing. "It all seems so simple, now," is a common response to such real-life materials. A tutor who writes and knows how it feels to struggle with ideas and words is a person who can be trusted. By being a writer as well as an instructor, a tutor is in a position to diagnose correctly, prescribe wisely, instruct effectively, and offer counsel and support encouragingly.

Working in the Writing Center brings both frustrations and compensations to a tutor. The most personal frustration he is likely to encounter is the same one that bothers a professor--a lack of interest or motivation on the part of those few students who are looking for someone else to do their writing for them, who come unprepared and sit idly by, making little or no effort to think through or apply the concepts they need to master. Another set of frustrations may be a result of administrative complications. Space, equipment, and personnel are always limited throughout the University, even in the best of times.

As a result, the problems of cramped quarters, inconvenient hours, insufficient materials, and understaffing may be unavoidable, but they do place frustrating limits on the services which the Writing Center can offer the university community. Lack of communication with professors who are involved with the writing process in their teaching can frustrate the Writing Center staff as well. Students who are insecure about the writing process frequently misunderstand explanations and assignments given by their professors. As a result, a tutor may work with writing problems which the professor views as secondary, or be ignorant of such things as content requirements or formats which a particular professor expects of his students.

Generally, the frustrations teach us to be resourceful. We learn the proper channels for communicating our needs, and by doing so, we gain experience with administrative structures. When we seek advice from professors about specific students or writing problems, we also have an opportunity to advertise the Writing Center and to solicit the support of instructors with their materials and resources. And the special frustration of uninterested students forces us to watch carefully the methods of successful instructors, to share experiences and ideas, and to think creatively in our own methods and materials.

Though all our activities as tutors are helpful, our compensations grow directly out of our work. Of course a tutor who receives pay for his on-the-job training will appreciate that consideration, but of even greater benefit is the job itself. By working individually with students who come to the Writing

Center, we are exposed to a wide variety of personalities and writing problems. This exposure, in turn, gives us a more realistic view of the content and needs in composition courses. We also have a wide variety of instructional materials available, as well as opportunities to develop our own materials and methods. Tutoring done under the supervision of experienced college instructors, and staff meetings which encourage the exchange of observations, problems, and methods give us instruction we would never find in a classroom "How To Teach" course. Constant exposure to a broad variety of writing problems, assignments, and styles keeps us conscious of and conscientious about our own writing and provides a valuable credential when we seek employment. As each phase of our roles provides us with unique insights, we become better prepared for future roles as full-fledged instructors of English. Successful tutoring, which allows us to see a student progress from fearfulness to assurance in his writing and from aimless words to unified, coherent content and style, brings self-confidence and satisfaction, the two best rewards of all.

(b) E. J. Bronkema

Writing well is a skill--perfected only through a knowledge of basic rules and practice. The primary goal of the Writing Center at Illinois State is, of course, to help students develop their writing skills. The students who utilize our Center bring with them a variety of problems that we must try to solve. Before we can begin to do this though, we need to know of what nature

these problems will be and a little bit about what kinds of students will bring them to us. To be successful, any writing center should prepare to meet the needs of several types of students: those who do not possess the basic skills of English, those who need only to "polish" their writing skills, and those who need to be shown that they need not fear writing.

Students who do not understand the basic skills involved in writing well desperately need the individualized help that a writing center can provide. These students generally do not have a grasp of standard English; they want to write well but they really do not know how. For the most part, they realize that they need to exert a great deal of effort to become competent writers and they are willing to do so.

Robert is a good example of such a student. Robert came to us shortly after we had opened our doors in the fall of 1976. He had attended a large, inner-city Chicago public high school, and although he had taken four years of English, he had received very little formal instruction in either composition or grammar. He did not have a basic grasp of standard English and he wrote as he spoke. Robert became a "regular" of the Center, and his tutor instructed him on the parts of speech, the parts of a sentence, diction, and eventually paragraph development. He came to our center faithfully twice a week and after a semester of hard work, he was able to work independently on improving his writing skills. Robert had learned the basic rules of writing and was able to practice using them.

Some students only find it necessary to visit the Writing Center once or twice a semester, either for help with a specific assigned task or for help in one area of their writing that they recognize as being weak. Primarily, these students need to practice what they already know or refresh their memories on what they may have forgotten. The student who comes needing help in completing a specific task is usually an adequate writer. One student, for example, came to us wondering about the correct format to use when writing a resume; another sought help in composing a legal brief; still another was unsure of the precis he had written. These students need a resource person and while our tutors may not know exactly how to complete these tasks, they do know where to go to find out.

Some students come to us, already aware that some areas of their writing are weak. As is true with all our clientele, these students may be Composition 101 enrollees, upper-level or graduate students. Regardless of their university status, each wishes to polish his writing and can do so with a minimum of tutorial help. Generally, these students know what they need to concentrate on. One ISU junior, who was planning to go to law school after graduating, came inquiring about preparing for the LSAT exam. He knew that traditional grammar was covered extensively on the test and he was worried. He needed to review. His tutor gave him several handbooks and he began reviewing on his own. An additional example is Phil, a 27 year old veteran, who decided after several years to return to school. Since he had not written formally for years, he felt he might benefit from a general review of rhetoric.

Like Phil, any student who wishes to polish up his writing skills can benefit from the Writing Center services.

There is yet another type of student who utilizes the Writing Center at ISU--those who fear writing. Many come in waving corrected and returned assignments. They see only the red marks scrawled across the page and are panic-stricken. These students believe they cannot write when, in fact, they are afraid to write. "I know what I want to say; I just can't seem to write it down." They expect to grind out perfect papers immediately when to do so is nearly impossible for even the most proficient writers. When they fail, they oftentimes become disappointed and frustrated. They lack confidence in their own ability to write and many times this lack of confidence results from the fact that no one has ever taken the time to explain what those red marks scribbled across the page mean. Telling a student what his errors are is helpful, but only in part. Unless a student knows what "AWK," "cs," "faulty//," and "no " mean, he will not be able to correct and improve his writing. The individualized help available in a writing center allows the tutor to explain and show students how to correct the errors they have made. After they know how to correct an awkward sentence, they find that correcting that error is much simpler than they thought.

When Ellen first visited our Writing Center, she brought with her the first essay she had written for her Composition 101 class and the outline she had used to write it. The essay had been returned to her marked "unacceptable."

The tutor could see that the outline was well-organized and developed, while the essay itself rambled and made no sense. After a short lesson on organization and development, Ellen rewrote her essay in the Writing Center using the same outline, and her second effort was structurally sound and generally well-written.

Ellen was one of those who was afraid of writing. She had been conditioned to fear red marks, and she just assumed that she was a poor writer. In addition, the threats of a large, impersonal classroom where students are often numbers and where the pressures of public chastisement and the "grade" are omnipresent, were nonexistent in the Writing Center. Ellen was able to complete her essay without these hindrances and could relax more. Her much-improved second essay acted as positive reinforcement, and because Ellen and the tutor were working on a one-to-one basis, any mistakes she did make could be corrected immediately.

It is true that a few students come to our center with a negative or defensive attitude. Some only want their papers proofread; a few come only because their professors have "requested" them to attend. Many times, these students view their writing as an extension of themselves and to criticize it is to criticize them. To motivate these students becomes almost impossible and because they do not expect to profit from our services, they generally will not. For example, Leon dropped in one day with his master's thesis. It was carelessly written and had been rejected by the Graduate Committee. Leon wanted

the entire paper proofread and corrected in a week because he had to be in Ohio to begin his doctoral work. His tutors went over each page of the paper with painstaking care, and he listened as every error was explained, but he seemed more interested in having his tutors simply correct his mistakes. Leon's thesis was probably accepted when it was resubmitted because we did not see him again, but it is doubtful that he will remember that one of the most important keys to successful writing is the practical application of acquired skills.